

PARENTING

# got MAYHEM? call in a parenting coach

When the kids are fighting and life seems unmanageable, your team could use a new game plan

BY SHIRLEY HENDERSON

The calls come throughout the day and into the night from parents in need of advice. They have questions about everything—from what to do about a newborn who refuses to sleep to how to handle a 5-year-old who is turning his kindergarten classroom into a state of chaos.

Move over Big Momma. With all due respect to grandmothers everywhere, overly stressed moms and dads are phoning (or e-mailing) parenting coaches about child-rearing issues.

Enter Tiya Cunningham-Sumter, a life coach in Chicago who often finds herself administering a parenting tune-up to her clients with children. Her advice is usually given over the phone and oftentimes after much gnashing of teeth on the parents' part.

"Typically a parent coach comes in when a person is ready to move forward from a situation," says Sumter, who began coaching three years ago after seeing a reality television show where coaches created a peaceful, Zen-like existence for individuals who had previously experienced mayhem.

As part of her program, Sumter, who started LifeEditing.com, a coaching firm, creates exercises and games to help her clients establish harmony in the home. For instance, if a child isn't listening to or communicating with



In Chicago, Kelsi Sumter, 4 (top, r.), tries to get the attention of her sister Tyler, 11. Their mother (above, l.), Tiya Cunningham-Sumter, a life and relationship coach, converses with her client Deidre Williams while her daughter, Bridgette, listens in on the session.

WILLIAM DUNKLEY

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Tiya Cunningham-Sumter enjoys a peaceful moment with her daughter Kelsi. "In addition to praying with and over our families," she says, "coaching also works. It's a fresh approach that uses new tools, ideas and exercises that bring out the absolute best in each family member."

a parent, she assigns homework to both of them to help bridge the gap. "It helps when a parent openly listens to a child," says Sumter, a mother herself with two children, Kelsi, 4, and Kyler, 11. She asked one family to write a family mission statement based on their goals for the home. "A child is more likely to communicate and share his or her feelings when they are not just being told what to do or what not to do," she says.

Parent coaching can help to address the issues and demands of overworked, stressed parents who need answers, guidance—or perhaps just a listening ear. Coaches can earn certification after attending coaching workshops, some as long as eight months. They are required to have at least a bachelor's degree and often hold other jobs in addition to being coaches. They cannot dispense medical advice or education. Many coaches never even see the child. One of the main benefits of having a parent coach is convenience. Many will speak over the phone or even e-mail clients. There is often no need to make a face-to-face appointment, unless a parent requests it. For \$75 to \$300 for a one-hour session, a parent can become a better mom or dad.

Wouldn't calling up grandma be cheaper in the long run?

The answer is yes—and no. Deidre M. Williams, moth-

er of 15-year-old Bridgette, is a single mother and receptionist for an Internet technology firm in Chicago. After two parent-coaching sessions with Sumter, Williams says she has seen positive results. On the other hand, she feels that free advice from family members and friends sometimes come with strings attached or with pressure for her to do things a certain way.

When the two women have a face-to-face meeting, Williams calls her coach by her first name and they laugh, discuss church and children and seem like regular girlfriends. "Tiya listens openly without giving an opinion," says Williams, 37, who sought help when her teen daughter was rebelling against household rules. "Sometimes you need to talk to someone who will listen with an open mind and not just tell you, 'You need to do this.' Oftentimes with some [family members] giving advice, you can leave the conversation more messed up than you started off."

Parenthood is fraught with dilemmas concerning issues such as broken curfews, managing temper tantrums and whether or not to spank.

Distraught parents and children are the specialty of Lisa Nichols, a life coach/teacher/motivational speaker who is based in San Diego, where she founded *Motivating the Teen Spirit*, a program that improves child-parent relationships in

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families from varying socioeconomic backgrounds.

Nichols' programs are designed to include all-day seminars and summer camps where teenagers learn how to overcome negativity with healthy phrases of self-acceptance. Parents can partake in separate seminars to discuss their issues. "For parents who want to give their children self-discovery tools and equip them with life skills, coaching can be very effective," says Nichols, mother of 13-year-old Jelani.

The number of parenting coaches is uncertain. Many become certified through coaching programs like the Parent Coaching Institute (PCI), one of the most reputable training programs with a list of coaches who can give mom and dad a pep talk.

Pastor Latanya Allen, a Parenting Coaching Institute alum, is CEO of Bridge of Hope Learning Center, a non-profit organization in North Charleston, S.C. The center administers free coaching to moms and dads who wouldn't be able to afford a private coach. A former stay-at-home mom, Allen is the mother of three children, ages 9, 14 and 20. Because she and her husband, also a minister, were concerned about the state of Black families, they founded Bridge of Hope, which received a 21st Century Learning Center Grant as part of No Child Left Behind.

Allen has seen many parents who were challenged by their children's behavior. One parent, she recalls, had a 5-year-old child who was misbehaving in his kindergarten classroom. The child was so disruptive that Attention Deficit Hyperactivity Disorder (ADHD) was thought to be the reason for his behavior.

When Allen spoke to the child's mother, she found out that the youngster was staying up until 11:30 p.m. and was especially cranky in the mornings. After an earlier bedtime was instituted, the child began improving in school. "We look at how much time the parent is spending with the child," says Allen, who has a background in the mental



Parenting coach Pastor Latanya Allen talks to Marquetta Cooper during a parent counseling session. She runs Bridge of Hope Learning Center in North Charleston, S.C., which provides help for parents and their children.

health profession. "I usually have parents identify what their individual strengths are and we make improvements based on that. The objective is to be nonjudgmental [and] not to tell the parent what to do, but to discover what they can do to co-create a new environment."

While parenting coaches do not try to replace psychologists—or even the wisdom of Big Momma for that matter—they say they can make a positive difference for parents in need of support.

Allen says that she recognizes the need for parents to consult with family members on some things. However, she says, relatives and friends have their limitations.

"Grandma may not be able to offer as much parental relationship advice because of the technologies that we have today, such as the Internet and certain television shows that kids are exposed to," says Allen. "Grandma didn't have to contend with those things."

## finding the right parenting coach for you

Parent coach Cathy Cassani Adams, a licensed clinical social worker and teacher who lives outside of Chicago, often works with families with new babies. She is also the mother of three children ages 5, 3 and 9 months and knows all too well about the type of support many new parents require after bringing a newborn home. Adams and other coaches offer these tips for finding the right parent coach for your situation:

■ **SHOP AROUND FOR A PARENT COACH.** If you are experiencing the trauma of life with a newborn or problems with a teenager, find a coach who works with parents who have similar issues. The Parent Coaching Institute ([www.parentcoachinginstitute.com](http://www.parentcoachinginstitute.com)) has a list of coaches by state along with their areas of expertise.

■ **BEFORE YOU INK A DEAL, FIND OUT HOW MUCH THE PARENT COACH WILL COST AND WHAT YOU WILL GET FOR YOUR MONEY.** Adams charges \$80 per one-hour session. That includes one phone call a week, unlimited e-mailing, a summary letter and a synopsis of what the parent is doing right to improve his or her situation.

■ **ASK FOR A COMPLIMENTARY COACHING SESSION BEFORE YOU COMMIT.** Some coaches will meet with you for a shorter amount of time to see if there is a coach-parent connection.

■ **MAKE SURE THAT YOUR PARENT COACH IS A PARENT.** Many coaches are in fact parents themselves. You may want to observe the coach with his or her children to see his or her method of dealing with kids.